

Testimony of John Hope Franklin

Before the

House Judiciary Committee  
Subcommittee on Constitution, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties

On the

Tulsa Greenwood Riot Accountability Act of 2007

April 24, 2007

Professor John Hope Franklin  
James B. Duke Professor of History Emeritus  
Duke University Law School\*

\*For identification purposes only

Dear Chairman John Conyers, members of the House Judiciary Committee and Subcommittee on Constitutional Rights:

My name is John Hope Franklin and I am the James B. Duke Professor Emeritus of History at the Law School at Duke University. I bring testimony today as both a historian and survivor of the 1921 Tulsa race riot. My full biographical information is attached and I will not use the committee's valuable time to review it now. I have attached by declaration from Tulsa litigation as written testimony.

DECLARATION OF DR. JOHN HOPE FRANKLIN

1. I am an historian currently serving as the James B. Duke Professor of History Emeritus at Duke University in Durham, North Carolina. I received my Bachelor of Arts from Fisk University, and a doctorate in history from Harvard University in 1941. I have studied, written, and taught extensively on the subjects of African-American history and race over the last several decades, and my work includes numerous books and hundreds of articles and speeches on these topics. I have also served as the head of the three major historical associations in the United States, and recently served as the Chairman of the Advisory Board to President Clinton's Initiative on Race.
2. My father was born in the Indian territory and grew up in Oklahoma. He lived through the Tulsa race riot in 1921. I moved to Tulsa when I was ten years old, just four years after the Tulsa riot, and witnessed first-hand the impact the riot had on Tulsa.
3. In addition to writing and teaching on the general subjects of African American history and race, I have also written and spoken specifically about the Tulsa riot and its long term effects on Tulsa. These perspectives are based on the personal experience of moving to Tulsa four years after the riot, and on my later work studying and considering history and race, which added a scholarly perspective to these personal experiences.
4. I observed and have concluded the 1921 riot had a devastating impact on Tulsa that

lasted for decades. In my public statements and published work, I have recounted my view that a culture of silence and official negligence descended on the white community of Tulsa in the years after the riot, and persisted for several decades, and my view that in Tulsa's black community in the ensuing decades, after the economic and physical destruction of the riot, the difficulty of rebuilding, and the indifference or worse of the white community, a public silence among blacks also settled in, even while they privately remembered and feared the riot and its aftermath. For example, in the Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921 released in February 2001, I wrote an overview of the report with Scott Ellsworth in which we stated:

By any standard, the Tulsa race riot of 1921 is one of the great tragedies of Oklahoma history. Walter White, one of the nation's foremost experts on racial violence, who visited Tulsa during the week after the riot, was shocked by what had taken place. "I am able to state" he said, "that the Tulsa riot, in sheer brutality and willful destruction of life and property, stands without parallel in America."

Indeed, for a number of observers through the years, the term "riot" itself seems somehow inadequate to describe the violence and conflagration that took place. For some, what occurred in Tulsa on May 31 and June 1, 1921 was a massacre, a pogrom, or, to use a more modern term, an ethnic cleansing. For others, it was nothing short of a race war. But whatever terms is used, one thing is certain: when it was all over, Tulsa's African American district had been turned into a scorched wasteland of vacant lots, crumbling storefronts, burned churches, and blackened, leafless trees.

Like the Murrah Building bombing, the Tulsa riot would forever alter life in Oklahoma. . . . But unlike the Oklahoma City bombing, which has, to this day, remained a high profile event, for many years the Tulsa race riot practically disappeared from view. For decades afterwards, Oklahoma newspapers rarely mentioned the riot, the state's historical establishment essentially ignored it, and entire generations of Oklahoma school children were taught little or nothing about what had happened. To be sure, the riot was still a topic of conversation, particularly in Tulsa. But these discussions – whether among family or friends, in barber shops or

on the front porch – were private affairs. And once the riot slipped from the headlines, its public memory also began to fade.

Of course, any one who lived through the riot could never forget what had taken place. And in Tulsa's African American neighborhoods, the physical, psychological, and spiritual damage caused by the riot remained highly apparent for years. Indeed, even today there are places in the city where the scars of the riot can still be observed.

“History Knows No Fences, An Overview,” John Hope Franklin & Scott Ellsworth, Report by the Oklahoma Commission to Study the Tulsa Race Riot of 1921, at 24-25 (2001) (Attached as Exhibit A.).

5. Similarly, I stated in a speech at a reconciliation service at Mt. Zion Baptist Church in Tulsa in 2000, that when I first moved to Tulsa four years after the riot, seeing “half-built buildings and churches reduced to basements, including Mt. Zion,” were like the images I saw “in the aftermath of World War II bombing in Europe.” (As reported in “79 Years After Race Riot, Rebuilding Still the Focus,” *Daily Armoreite*, June 5, 2000 (Attached as Exhibit B)).

Although those churches were rebuilt, I have also noted that other, more insidious effects of the riot persisted: “One of the most profound effects [of the Riot] in the long run was what it did to the city. It robbed it of its honesty, and it sentenced it to 75 years of denial.” (As reported in “Race Riot Panelists OK Dig for Remains,” *Tulsa World*, Aug. 10, 1999 (Attached as Exhibit C)).

6. I have also stated to the Oklahoma Commission and in other instances that any reparation to the victims of the riot “is a mere pittance compared to the three-quarters of a century of suffering of the victims of the looting, burning, killing, and bombing, as so many endured.”

*Tulsa World*, Aug. 10, 1999 (Exhibit C); see also “Righting a Wrong: It’s Time for Reparations for Tulsa’s Race Rampage,” *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette*, Aug. 14, 1999 (Attached as Exhibit D).

7. I have also expressed my view that we still have much to learn from the riot, because to

learn from events such as the riot, these events must be confronted and dealt with, and Tulsa, like other places in which violent racial incidences have occurred, has never dealt honestly with what happened, and because of this failure, the city and its black community in particular has simply never recovered from the event. “Black Historian Chronicles Time Franklin Leads Race Panel,” *Daily Oklahoman*, April 18, 1999 (Attached as Exhibit E); *see also* “Historian Hopes Service to Bring Reconciliation,” *Tulsa World*, June 4, 2000 (Attached as Exhibit F); “Small Steps by Many Can Aid Race Relations,” *Seattle Times*, April 13, 1998 (Attached as Exhibit G).

8. None of this is inconsistent with the view I expressed in the foreword to Scott Ellsworth's book, *Death in a Promised Land*, in which I said that immediately after the riot, there was a spirit, born no doubt of dire necessity, of people picking themselves up and rebuilding, instead of dwelling on the horror and destruction. In stating that people had high self-esteem in the period after the riot, I also said this was as a result of myths and beliefs that people developed as a means of coping with the riot and moving on. *Death in the Promised Land* xvi-xvii (1982) (Attached as Exhibit H).

9. In addition, while it is true that there was a sort of “bouncing back” period in Tulsa immediately after the riot – which is why the churches that had been reduced to basements were eventually rebuilt – this does not describe the long-term effects of the riot, which were, in my view, negative, devastating, and persistent to this day. My belief in the negative, long-term effects of the riot has grown in the years since Ellsworth's book was published, as I have learned more about the riot, have visited Tulsa, and had more time to reflect on the riot's impact.

10. I believe in the long-term, the riot has cast a pall over the city, and has made it feel half-dead even today. Prior to the riot, the black community in Tulsa had been economically prosperous, not to mention spiritually and physically cohesive and strong. The riot was

economically devastating, and given the lack of assistance and almost absolute segregation that existed for decades after the riot, people were not able to recover economically. The combination of circumstances that existed after the riot made it impossible for blacks in Tulsa to live as upstanding and fearless citizens even if they initially tried to do so. People did not just lose their homes and businesses, they seemed eventually to lose part of their dreams and their will, at least as a group. Thus while I believe there was a period of approximately ten years in which people made their best effort to rebuild, and revitalize their community educationally and socially, eventually, given the economic devastation, and the persistent and complete separation and indifference of the white community, a pall of discouragement set in among the black community. And because the city has never honestly confronted what happened, that pall persists to this day.

I declare under penalty of perjury that the foregoing is true and correct.

Executed this \_\_\_ day of December, 2003, in Durham, North Carolina

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/S/

Dr. John Hope Franklin

## Biography of John Hope Franklin

Hope Franklin is the James B. Duke Professor Emeritus of History, and for seven years was Professor of Legal History in the Law School at Duke University. He is a native of Oklahoma and a graduate of Fisk University. He received the A.M. and Ph.D. degrees in history from Harvard University. He has taught at a number of institutions, including Fisk University, St. Augustine's College, North Carolina Central University, and Howard University. In 1956 he went to Brooklyn College as Chairman of the Department of History; and in 1964, he joined the faculty of the University of Chicago, serving as Chairman of the Department of History from 1967 to 1970. At Chicago, he was the John Matthews Manly Distinguished Service Professor from 1969 to 1982, when he became Professor Emeritus.

Professor Franklin's numerous publications include *The Emancipation Proclamation*, *The Militant South*, *The Free Negro in North Carolina*, *Reconstruction After the Civil War*, and *A Southern Odyssey: Travelers in the Ante-bellum North*. Perhaps his best known book is *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African-Americans*, now in its seventh edition. His Jefferson Lecture in the Humanities for 1976 was published in 1985 and received the Clarence L. Holte Literary Prize for that year. In 1990, a collection of essays covering a teaching and writing career of fifty years, was published under the title, *Race and History: Selected Essays, 1938-1988*. In 1993, he published *The Color Line: Legacy for the Twenty-first Century*. Professor Franklin's most recent book, *My Life and an Era: The Autobiography of Buck Colbert Franklin*, is an autobiography of his father that he edited with his son, John Whittington Franklin. His current research deals with "Dissidents on the Plantation: Runaway Slaves."

Professor Franklin has been active in numerous professional and education organizations. For many years he has served on the editorial board of the *Journal of Negro History*. He has also served as President of the following organizations: The American Studies Association (1967), the Southern Historical Association (1970), the United Chapters of Phi Beta Kappa (1973-76), the Organization of American Historians (1975), and the American Historical Association (1979). He has been a member of the Board of Trustees of Fisk University, the Chicago Public Library, and the Chicago Symphony Orchestra Association.

Professor Franklin has served on many national commissions and delegations, including the National Council on the Humanities, from which he resigned in 1979, when the President appointed him to the Advisory Commission on Public Diplomacy. He has also served on the President's Advisory Commission on Ambassadorial Appointments. In September and October of 1980, he was a United States delegate to the 21st General Conference of UNESCO. Among many other foreign assignments, Dr. Franklin has served as Pitt Professor of American History and Institutions at Cambridge University, Consultant on American Education in the Soviet Union, Fulbright Professor in Australia, and Lecturer in American History in the People's Republic of China. Currently, Professor Franklin serves as chairman of the advisory board for *One America: The President's Initiative on Race*.

Professor Franklin has been the recipient of many honors. In 1978, *Who's Who in America* selected Dr. Franklin as one of eight Americans who has made significant contributions

to society. In the same year, he was elected to the Oklahoma Hall of Fame. He also received the Jefferson Medal for 1984, awarded by the Council for the Advancement and Support of Education. In 1989, he was the first recipient of the Cleanth Brooks Medal of the Fellowship of Southern Writers, and in 1990 received the Encyclopedia Britannica Gold Medal for the Dissemination of Knowledge. In 1993, Dr. Franklin received the Charles Frankel Prize for contributions to the humanities, and in 1994, the Cosmos Club Award and the Trumpet Award from Turner Broadcasting Corporation. In 1995, he received the first W.E.B. DuBois Award from the Fisk University Alumni Association, the Organization of American Historians' Award for Outstanding Achievement, the Alpha Phi Alpha Award of Merit, the NAACP's Spingarn Medal, and the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In 1996, Professor Franklin was elected to the Oklahoma Historians Hall of Fame and in 1997 he received the Peggy V. Helmerich Distinguished Author Award. In addition to his many awards, Dr. Franklin has received honorary degrees from more than one hundred colleges and universities.

Professor Franklin has been extensively written about in various articles and books. Most recently he was the subject of the film *First Person Singular: John Hope Franklin*. Produced by Lives and Legacies Films, the documentary was featured on PBS in June 1997.